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J. N. Ding

Ruth A. Gallaher

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J. N. Ding

Two women, it is said, were once discussing the claims to distinction of their respective cities. "Well, anyway", said the woman from Milwaukee, "everybody knows that Ding, who makes cartoons for the *Milwaukee Journal*, is the most famous cartoonist in the whole world."

"Why, my dear", said the second woman, "of course Ding is the best cartoonist there is, but he lives in Baltimore. He has a cartoon in the *Sun* every day."

A similar claim might be made by residents of more than one hundred cities in the United States, but, as a matter of fact, J. N. Ding lives in Des Moines, Iowa, in a modest but comfortable home, with a rock garden and swimming pool in the back yard. His name, when he is not making cartoons, is Jay Norwood Darling.

The middle name is apparently reminiscent of his birthplace, for he was born in a Congregational parsonage at Norwood, Michigan. The date was October 21, 1876. To his life in a minister's family in various towns and cities of the Middle West, Mr. Darling attributes much of his sympathetic interest in folks. Problems of members of the congregation were often discussed, and Jay and his brother were encouraged to give suggestions and assistance.

A gradual expansion of interests, however, may be noted. A random survey of the *Register* in the summer of 1907 shows cartoons on politics, employment, sports, Russia, Roosevelt, the Peace Congress, the North Pole, crops, economics, a bank inspector, spring weather, boys going fishing, railroads, smoke, lawn mowing, a man keeping house, athletics, the Haywood trial, a college graduate looking for work, train schedules, mosquitoes, Standard Oil, Hearst, an excursion, and the Des Moines city government. The inclusion of cartoons dealing with domestic problems may have been due to the fact that in October, 1906, Mr. Darling married Miss Genevieve Pendleton of Sioux City. The fact that there were some twenty cartoons dealing with municipal government in a few weeks is evidence of Ding's interest in the affairs of the city in which he lived, an interest he has never lost.

In the summer of 1911, Mr. Darling accepted a position as cartoonist on the staff of the New York *Globe*, and it appeared that here was another example of the wisecrack that great men come *from* Iowa. For almost two years Ding lived in New York. Then he returned to Des Moines, explaining that in the great city he was losing vital contact with people and nature. On March 30, 1913, the Des Moines *Register* published a full page welcome to the returning cartoonist. Ding's cartoons have been an ever popular feature of the *Register's* front page ever since.



J. N. DARLING

COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

Since 1917, however, the New York *Herald-Tribune* has headed a syndicate of over one hundred newspapers which buy the drawings of the Iowa cartoonist. These represent all sections of the United States and include such influential publications as the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, the Kansas City *Star*, the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, the Baltimore *Sun*, and the Milwaukee *Journal*.

Under the first contract, Mr. Darling was to live at least four months of the year in New York. But Ding did not like living in the great city. In an article in *The American Magazine* of July, 1919, he told why he preferred Des Moines to New York. "So far as making cartoons is concerned," he said, "I cannot see that it would make a bit of difference whether I live in New York, Des Moines or Mozambique. The days when my cartoon 'falls' in the baking, any place would seem disagreeable — and would be quite a little more disagreeable for my being there, too. And the days when I do 'ring the bell' I could be happy any where".

What really attracts Ding to Des Moines is the comradeship of the community life in the smaller city. "Out West", he writes, "we have to get our sea food canned. But rather canned sea food and fresh friendships than canned friendships and fresh sea food! When you boil all the superfluous water out of life, and sugar off, if you haven't gathered a goodly residue of friendships and affections, you aren't going to have very much sweetness left in the

kettle." Life in the crowded, indifferent city he characterized by the following story.

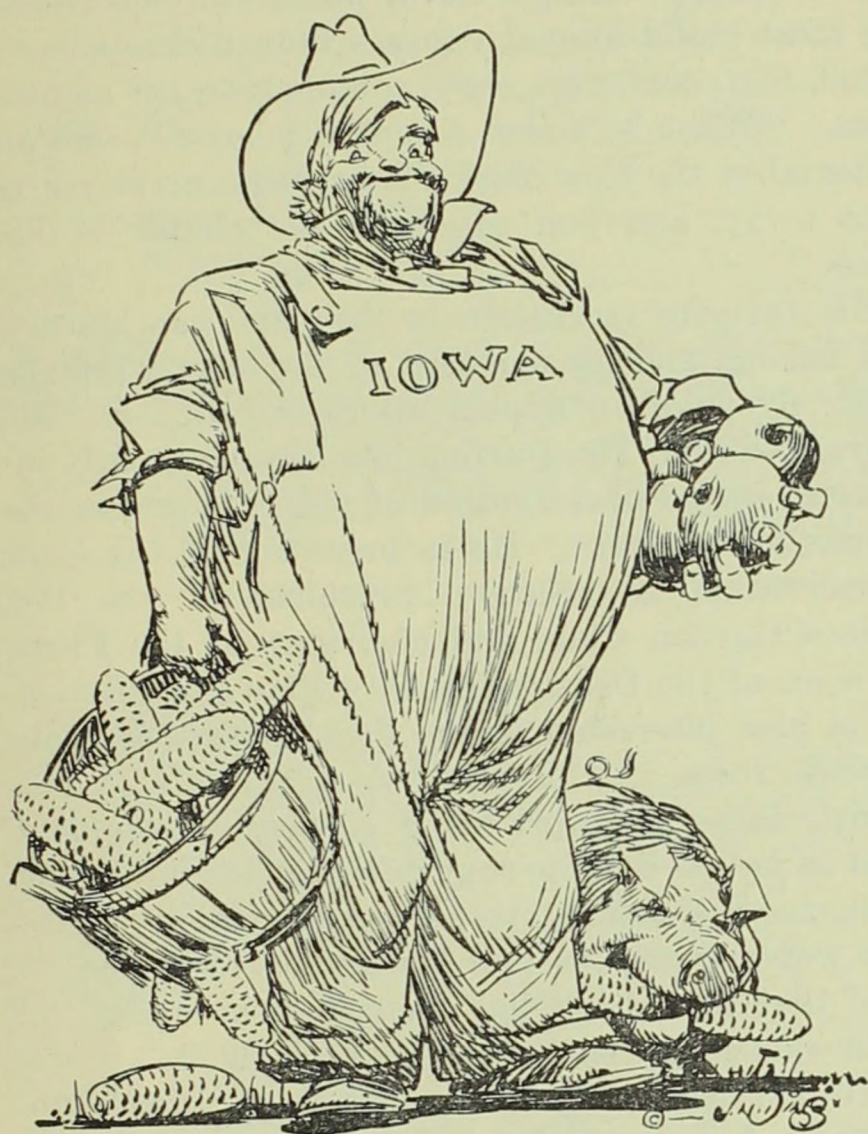
"There is a coyote from the windswept prairies of Nebraska that now lives in ease and luxury in New York City.

"He has a furnished apartment, servants, trained nurses for his children, aristocratic neighborhood, fine view overlooking the park, and the best of meals served from a nearby community kitchen.

"I suppose he is the most distinguished and noticed coyote in the world; but when he dies of fatty degeneration of the heart or of apoplexy from too much food and too little exercise, they'll just go out and catch another to take his place."

So J. N. Darling now spends most of his time in the Middle West. That he has succeeded in making for himself a place in the hearts of his neighbors, and readers as well, was evident during his illness in 1925, when thousands of letters and telegrams of inquiry were received at his office and newspapers all over the United States printed editorials of good wishes.

Farm life is one of Ding's special hobbies. On the outskirts of Des Moines he has a small farm and he often rides out in the morning to see his cows. This interest is reflected in his cartoons of Iowa farm life. Father Iowa, in overalls and straw hat, carries baskets of corn from the bulging cribs. Mother Iowa, rotund and smiling, proffers pans heaped with doughnuts. Horses, cows, calves, pigs, and chickens



— FROM IOWA AND PROUD OF IT —

COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

grin comically. Ding's clever pencil can make even the most stolid animal express human emotions — greed, fear, contempt, envy, complacency, or amusement. "When he makes a runaway horse", said an editorial in the *New York Times*, "the horse really runs away, and you can hear the clatter of his hoofs."

His favorite recreation in the past was hunting and fishing, and his cartoons of the days when the ducks fly have an appeal all their own. Of late years, however, Mr. Darling has become greatly interested in the preservation of wild life and in the promotion of parks. He is president of the Iowa Conservation Association, president of the Des Moines Garden Club, and chairman of the Parks Division of the Des Moines City Plan Commission. He is also interested in the development of State parks in Iowa.

Ding takes his work as a cartoonist seriously. That is, he has definite convictions and believes that his cartoons should express these principles. Asked how wet newspapers like his dry cartoons, he replied that they don't like them, but, he added, "I never change my cartoons for any body."

William Allen White once wrote of Ding's position in American life: "There is art, great art, Ding's art. For nearly a quarter of a century, with growing vogue, Mr. Darling has impressed himself upon the spirit of America. He stands well among the leading men of his profession who shape public



COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

WHY IT SEEMS ABOUT TIME TO BEGIN TALK OF CONSERVATION



COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

WE DO HOPE THE WILD FLOWERS APPRECIATE HOW
ARDENTLY WE LOVE THEM

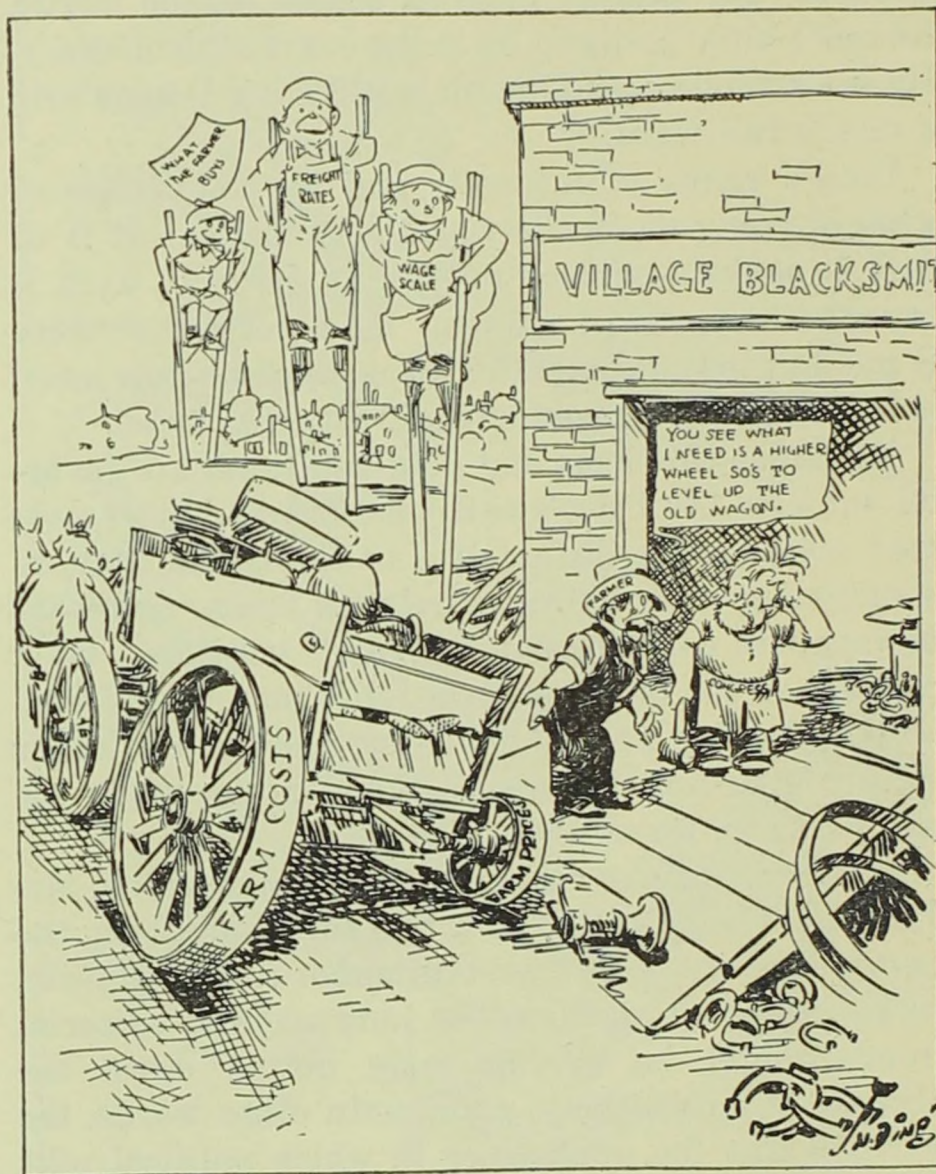
opinion. He handles lines as others handle words. No mere hired jester is he in the court of democracy. He is councilor, speaking up to old King Demos with a man's full right."

Ding's range of interests and his knowledge of what is going on in the world is amazing. It is as easy to make a cartoon every day, he says, as it is to make only one in a week. He asserts that there is no limit to the number of ideas a person may have, if he has sufficient contacts and uses his brain.

Economic problems and political issues are favorite subjects for Ding's cartoons, but he knows, too, that most people do not like to think and that instruction must be interspersed with humor and what newspapers call "human interest" subjects. So a cartoon on the tariff or farm relief may be followed by one showing a small boy going fishing or a father grimly guarding his neckties and socks while the son packs up for college.

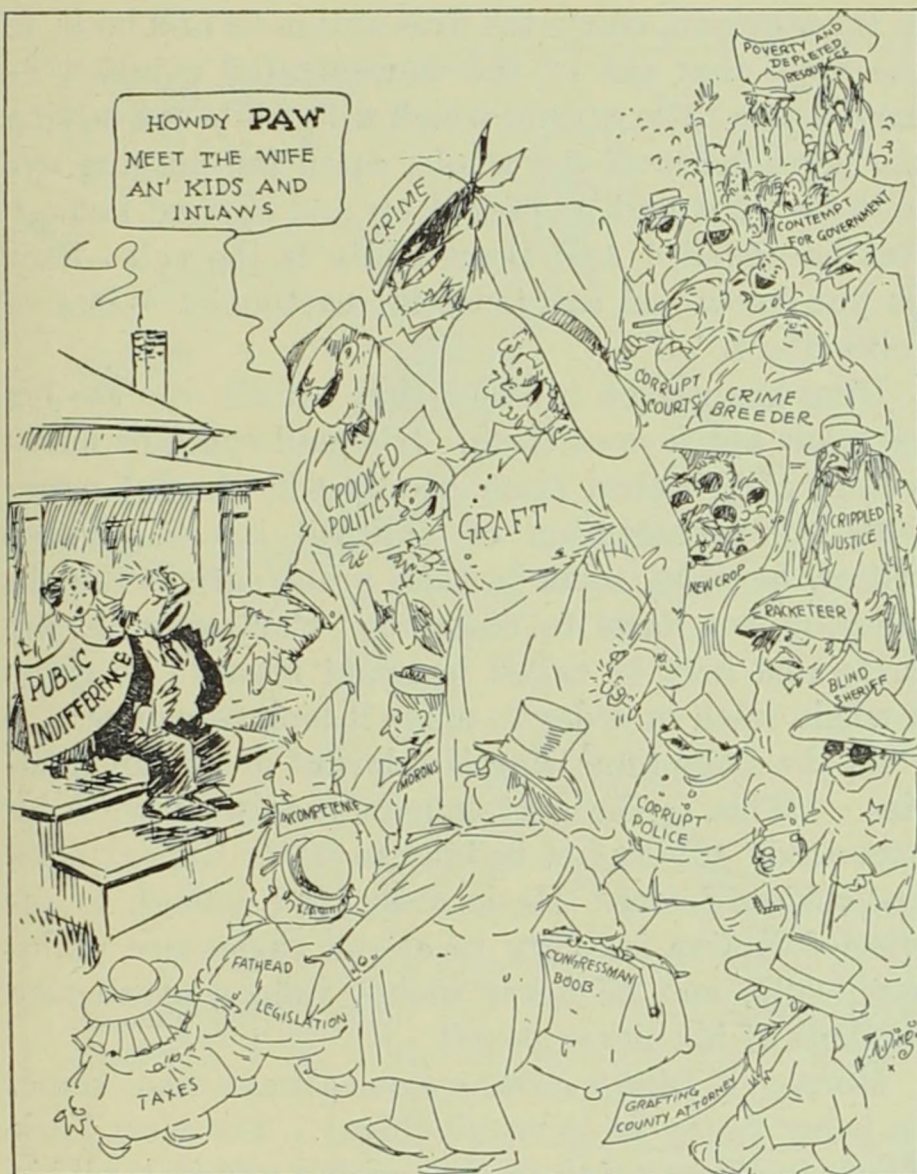
In discussing the rôle of the political cartoon, Mr. Darling once said: "I fancy that in its inception, the cartoon set out to be a sort of humor-coated capsule, by means of which the sober judgments of editorial minds might be surreptitiously gotten down the throats of an apathetic public. In other words, the cartoon was the applesauce in which political pills were immersed and fed to unwilling children."

The cartoonist, he said in a radio speech, "absorbs all of the information, facts and emotions of passing events he can hold and daily puts himself



COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

AS THE FARMER SEES IT



COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

A HOMECOMING MAY BE A GOOD THING NOW AND THEN TO GET
ACQUAINTED WITH OUR OFFSPRING

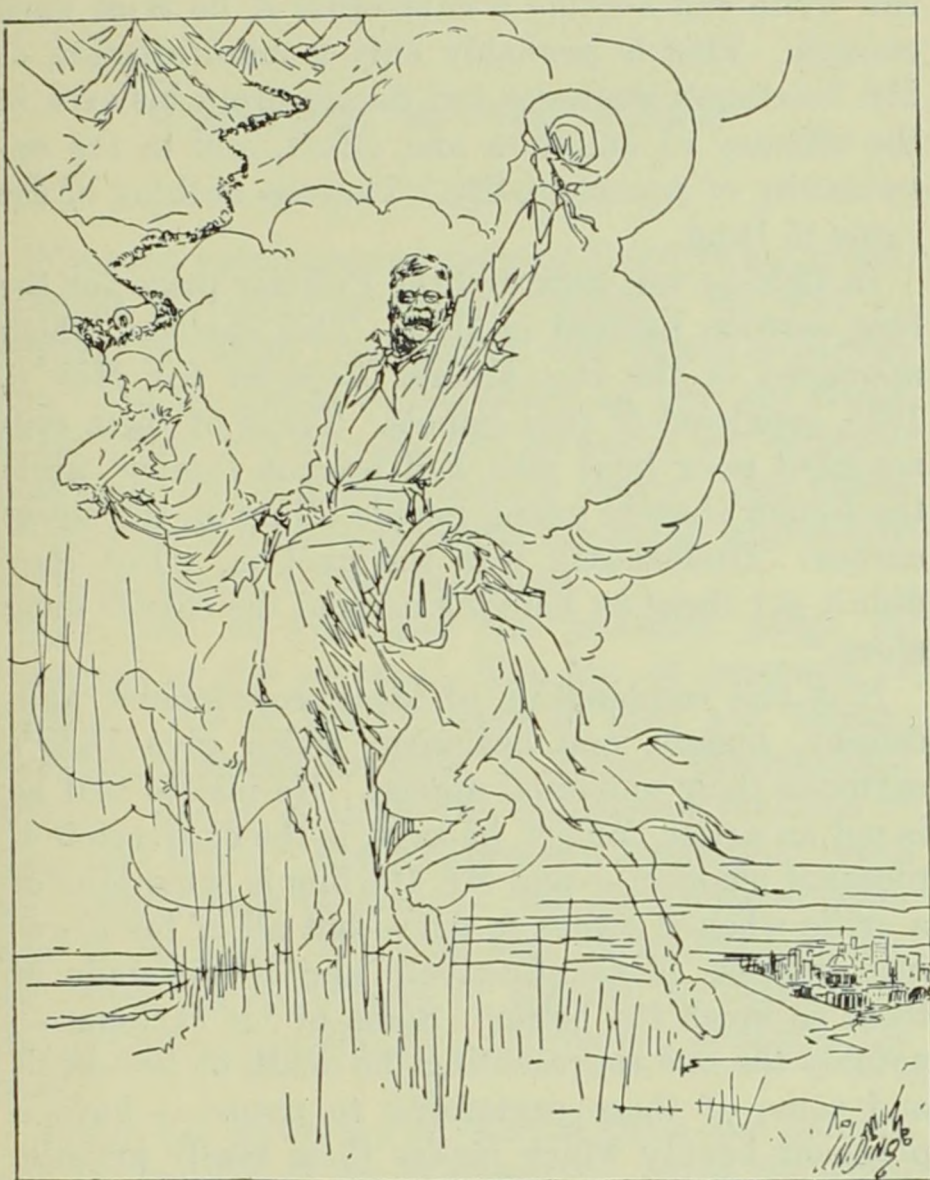
in the stewpan, starts the fires and boils and boils, in the hope that out of the concentrated solution he may coax a little crystal which will, while embodying the ingredients of the whole, catch the passing eye with its glint and be picked up and carried home." But he added, "And there again is the rub. How do you know you can trust the cartoonist — lots of folks don't."

Ding has reason to know that not all who see his cartoons approve of them. His mail contains many letters of criticism from people who do not agree with his presentation of political issues. These critics, he says, seem to take great satisfaction in pointing out flaws in cartoons. For example, the cartoonist may be called ignorant because he gives a whale teeth in order to make it look ferocious.

At the same time Ding is tolerant of human frailties. "This is the only human race we have", he once said. "Why not be kind to it?" His cartoons are seldom bitter. He is even kind enough to respect feminine inability to accept caricature philosophically, and he never makes women characters the butt of his clever pencil.

Moreover, Ding's cartoons are always wholesome. In being funny he is never vulgar. The *New York Times* in commenting on this quality added, "All his work is so clean that its cleanliness escapes notice — it is taken for granted."

Another characteristic of Ding and his cartoons is optimism. Indeed, he insists that any one who



COURTESY OF J. N. DARLING

THE LONG LONG TRAIL

can write can become a cartoonist if he tries hard enough. This is probably only a manifestation of Mr. Darling's modesty, but he sincerely believes in the efficacy of ambition and effort, and in the opportunity of American life. There is nothing of the cynic in Ding.

In 1924 he was awarded the Pulitzer prize for the best cartoon printed in 1923. This cartoon, which appeared in the Des Moines *Register* for May 6, 1923, consisted of four panels. Three of them represented poor boys who had become famous while the fourth showed young people idling on the street corner. Underneath was the caption, "But they didn't get there by hanging around the corner drug store."

It is this combination of ideas, convictions, philosophy, humor, and optimism which give Ding's cartoons their universal appeal. He insists that he is not an artist, for art, he says, is the expression of pleasant emotion — and Mr. Darling is something of a critic when it comes to art — but all of his drawings express ideas effectively and if we smile at them so much the better. Some of his cartoons — notably the one representing the death of Roosevelt and some of those pertaining to nature — have a poignant beauty which makes them really artistic, in the more critical meaning of the term.

RUTH A. GALLAHER